

THE SAD CASE OF PORTO RICO

by

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Two major problems perplex the old Spanish province of Porto Rico, arising out of its enforced relationship to the United States. One deals with the consequences of American economic development, the other with cultural Americanization. Both go to the root of the drama now being acted on that gorgeous stage; both are portentous in their potentialities.

The importance of the economic problem is obvious to all, whatever their views or interests. Americanization is more insidious. The tendency works while you sleep. It changes the expression of your eyes, the form of your paunch, the tone of your voice, your hopes of Heaven, what your neighbors and your women expect of you—all without giving you a chance to fight back, without even presenting to you the dilemma of fighting back or not. Certainly no two things are more important than to have what you want and to live as spontaneously as you can manage. These two hopes are now in process of being shot to hell in my country.

The American flag found Porto Rico penniless and content. It now flies over a prosperous factory worked by slaves who have lost their land and may soon lose their guitars and their songs. In the old days most Porto Rican peasants

owned a few pigs and chickens, maybe a horse or a cow, some goats, and in some way had the use of a patch of soil. Today this modest security has been replaced by a vision of opulence. There are more things that they can't have and what they can imagine has widened monstrously. While there are many more schools for their hungry children and many more roads for their bare feet, their destiny is decidedly narrower now than it was when they were part and parcel of one of the most interesting and incompetent nationalities in the world.

In 1898 Porto Rico was a semi-feudal country, typical of the old Spanish provinces in America, willing and capable of assuming with a natural grace and a natural awkwardness its position in the Spanish commonwealth of provinces, or to venture into a simple, old-fashioned Latin-American national form. Its economics were those developed by Spain in the tropical New World: fiscally rotten, socially humble and sound. Culturally, it was a slow, calm place. Racially, it shared with Costa Rica one peculiarity: a predominantly unmixed European peasantry—if Spain be Europe.

Schools were few, roads were fewer; chickens laid eggs under thatched cottages, goats cavorted outside and were corralled for a milking and sometimes killed for a stuffing, the squeal of pigs and not of factory whistles woke up the countryside. Pale, wiry, moustached, sleepy-eyed men tumbled out of hammocks pulling up their trousers for the day, and barefooted women in terribly starched dresses of many colors began preparing strong coffee in iron kettles and serving it steaming in polished cocoanut shells. Although Porto Rico was not then one of the great sugar producing centres of the world, there was usually sugar at the bottom of the cocoanut and the sleepy-eyed man stirred it lazily with a wooden spoon, tasting it with his eyes and his nose. Inside the hut the brats wailed; one of them soothed itself by finding five eggs, certified by cackles, under the floor, another by plucking from the wall the image of the Virgin, printed in screaming blue and red. The men left for the field to cut cane, to lead the oxen on their sugar grinding merry-go-round, to prune or pick the coffee bushes in the sloping shade of the tall guavas, to pick and seed the cotton or sift the tobacco leaves or spade in

their masters' truck field. As they wound their way along the coastal plain or twisted along the precipitous mountain paths a very few pennies jingled in their pockets.

At noon the *jíbaro* comforted himself, for two cents, with a tumbler of rum bought at the store under the ceiba tree, and went home to a meal of codfish with sweet potatoes and rice mixed with beans. The rice and beans were plentiful; he ate of them until he had enough, and then he slept. After the day's work he loafed in the starlight, sang fantastic songs, usually depicting a topsy-turvy grandeur of some sort, made love to one or two girls, and then went home and made love to his wife.

Of a Sunday, he might with a number of his friends car a barbecued pig, get drunk in the shade and go to a cockfight. If there was sickness in the family, the master of the plantation would send his doctor, and the master's wife might send some quinine or rhubarb or cadillo leaves. I don't believe he ever went to bed hungry or muddled through a spell of sickness without attention.

As he could not read, it was unlikely that he would discover that Porto Rico's total production for the year came to something less than \$9,000,000 and that 950,000 human beings were living, sleeping, eating, drinking, feasting, gambling, singing, and loving on that money.

His master, the feudal lord, rose out of an enormous mahogany bed, washed his hands and face in cold water out of an enameled bowl with a design of roses, and breakfasted on a cup of coffee, rolls, butter, and cheese. Then he shouted for his horse and rode over his land, seeing that everyone was at work, inquiring after those who were sick or lazy, listening to gossip, giving advice on marriages. It was not until later in the morning that, coming upon a secluded bend of the stream where the *pomarrosas* bent over the water, he took of his clothes and bathed.

He owned his house; his hills and ravines were lightly mortgaged or not at all; he chose out of several horses for his tours of his domain; he bred, bought or

swapped roosters to uphold the honor of his judgment; he fathered his men gruffly or kindly, intelligently or stupidly. Perhaps he wanted a house in the nearest town, or, perhaps not in the nearest town, or, perhaps not in the nearest town but in the capital of the district. Maybe some day he would even move to San Juan. Someone had a horse of a rooster he coveted. They said that Madrid was a lively place, but it would probably bore him, so far from home, where no one would know him or greet him with deference or seek his advice. His son might be sent across to study, and might receive a visit from his parents during his last year at the university. It was a long trip though.

In San Juan, a city of many colors crowded within thick brown walls, occasional carriages clattered over the cobblestones; high ceilings made cool dark interiors; a rare cocoanut shell mounted in silver gave evidence in certain old houses of the time when glassware was an infrequent importation; the cafés were clubs where politics and women were discussed over ice cream, chocolate, or rum; and a bowlegged mulatto was famous as a procurer. Regional autonomy had been granted by Spain, and a native Cabinet with a native Premier ruled the green fields and polychromatic towns.

If you didn't own a house, you might own one. If you didn't have a carriage, you might have one. If you did have these goods and a little money in the bank for a trip to Madrid or Paris now and then, you were at the top, and peace, romance, or prestige were your remaining goals. Porto Rico was a land of opportunity. Opportunity in a serene Spanish sense. Opportunity within classes. All that a man of a given class could imagine himself as attaining, he could attain. His economic imagination wasn't stimulated by the brash parade of contraptions which were later to become badges of honor and tokens of social superiority. You didn't have much, and you only want a little more. There was only one millionaire on the island, but there were many lords and masters of the soil.

II

Presto, the flag! The one and only. The magic carpet on which Rotary,

benevolence, and interference fly over the crumbling liberties and inefficiencies of the earth. It found a dignified little world, bearing with an easy penury, playing the *tiple*, and dreaming of a moon which was attainable. Its servitors set to work to transform that little world into a hasty one, pushing great iron wheels, slipping innumerable bills of lading across Grand Rapids desks, and dreaming of automobiles, which are mostly unattainable. "Mother," the troubadours used to sing.

I bought a toy
In the market-place of love.
How pretty it was, of, how pretty it was,
But what price I had to pay!

But soon they were singing:

The automobile, oh, mother, is something
That surprises all people, oh, mother,
And is prodigious.

Spain had recently granted Porto Rico an autonomous form of government. The island was run by Porto Ricans under a responsible Cabinet system, and the Governor-General, barring his military command, was as purely ceremonial as his colleague of Canada. Porto Rico had control of her customs, a measure of treaty-making power, sixteen representatives in the Madrid Cortes. She was empowered to develop her economic life as best suited her tastes and interests. Her statesmen and politicians had the future in their hands. Theirs was the responsibility for molding this quiet lovely place into an image of unassuming prosperity and justice. Porto Rico is small, not very complex, and the task was—and is—an easy one, if only it be undertaken in a spirit of objective statesmanship, with no axes to grind.

But there seems to be a feeling in the United States against permitting others to be responsible for their own welfare. Under American rule the native Cabinet, tolerated at first, soon found its existence made unendurable

by the encroachments of the Military Governors. It resigned. A mongrel system of government, under the Foraker Act, took the place of the ample autonomy established by Spain. The Lower House was elected by popular suffrage. The Cabinet was the Upper House, blithely combining legislative and executive functions. This Cabinet-Senate was composed of six Porto Ricans and five Americans, all appointed by the American authorities.

It was not difficult to find six adequate Porto Ricans. They were found. But, although a community can be ruled by a few men willing to rule it in a nice way, some kind of supporting majority is demanded by the democratic yen. So a majority was found. To be a member of this majority all you had to do was to proclaim yourself an ardent American in bad English, or in no English at all. If you were a member of the majority, you could become a street-cleaner or a health inspector, or you could recommend some poor henchman for either job.

Then the tariff wall was thrown around the island. Sugar became the chief beneficiary and cane spread over the valleys and up the hillsides like wildfire. The Spanish economy had been somewhat haphazardly predicated on small land-holdings. The American economy, introduced by the Guanica, the Aguirre, the Fajardo and other great *centrales*, was based on the million-dollar mill and the tight control of the surrounding countryside.

By now the development of large absentee-owned sugar estates, the rapid curtailment in the planting of coffee—the natural crop of the independent farmer--, and the concentration of cigar manufacture into the hands of the American trust, have combined to make Porto Rico a land of beggars and millionaires, of flattering statistics and distressing realities. More and more it becomes a factory worked by peons, fought over by lawyers, bossed by absent industrialists, and clerked by politicians. It is now Uncle Sam's second largest sweat-shop.

It is a sweat-shop that has a company store—the United States. American dollars paid to the peons are so many tokens, redeemable in the American

market exclusively, at tariff-inflated prices. The same tariff that protects the prices of sugar and tobacco, controlled by the few, skyrockets the prices of commodities that must be consumed by all. Porto Rico obtains tariff prices and pays tariff prices. The appearance of justice is maintained, but the reality is a pawn-broker's reality.

The favorable trade-balance, so naïvely emphasized by the official reports, are therefore a choice bit of irony. During the last twenty-eight years of American rule the island has enjoyed an unfavorable trade-balance only twice. In each of the other twenty-six years the exports have exceeded the imports in the same manner that the exports of a burglarized house exceed its imports. In brief, the renowned favorable balance is nothing but the profit of the absentee landlords and industrialists.

Here, as Al Smith would say, is the low-down. From 1901 to 1927 \$228,000,000 was extracted from Porto Rico and reported as a favorable trade-balance. But if the island had been privileged to forego that flattering balance, a reasonable proportion of those millions would have gone into the development of its industrial resources. As the whole island is now valued at about \$300,000,000, the effect of such reinvestment of the living standards of its overcrowded population would have been very important. To the American people, on the other hand, that money spread over that number of years, means nothing. Its ingress, even in one single year would have no more appreciable effect on their prosperity than a bucket of water on the tides of the Great Lakes. Yet these life-giving pennies have been filched from the pocket of a pauper by the fingers of an opulent kleptomaniac.

Of course, no such gorgeous dividends could have been declared had not the influence of American enterprise and the actual investment of American capital increased Porto Rico's output of dollars so fabulously. Certainly, the imperialists could argue if they felt compelled to, those millions represent but a small percentage of the increase of wealth brought about by the American régime. In dollars, they represent a profit of 16%. In value they represent incalculably more. The operation of the tariff against the consumer and the

expanding land monopoly explain the discrepancy. So far as the bulk of the population is concerned, only an eighty-cent wage paid during six months of the year to the head of each family, and redeemable only in the world's highest market, separates them from the angels.

III

It is close contact with the United States rather than the influence of the small group of resident Americans that has given a decided, if superficial, direction to the institutional life of the island. The Y.M.C.A. has its swimming pool, its basket ball court, its inspirational talks, but I doubt that such implied notions as Christ's disapproval of cigarettes get much serious attention from the local young men. Rotary slaps backs, sings, and hears speeches in a bored and genial way, but when I gave it a somewhat fantastic talk on the culture of light ladies as an index of civilization, the members really had a good time. The Elks and Odd Fellows play with their rituals, charity becomes slightly organized, evangelical preachers thunder in the villages, Holy Rollers roll in the back alleys, three or four prominent citizens become Protestants and are considered funny, women are beginning to be feared as the rolling-pin follows the flag, virginity still abounds and often attains to old age, but is perceptibly on the wane.

It is probably through the women that the largest doses of Americanism are being administered. The Latin-American attitude in this respect is confusing to a narrowly egalitarian world. Certainly we are wont to make a sharp nonsensical distinction between good and bad women—there is hardly any middle ground between chastity and prostitution. But this has not heretofore meant that the mere goodness of good women gave them any appreciable influence on the social point of view. Good women have been powerless and tame among us, and have grown smug in the consciousness of their hard luck. Generally speaking, there were only four things Latin women could be: old maids, wives, mistresses, or prostitutes. Now they can be girls. They can be girls for a long time.

They can also be stenographers, bookkeepers, telephone operators, shop assistants, and feminists. They may speak in public and harass legislators.

Porto Rican politicians may now be publicly accused of keeping mistresses. The charge doesn't come near defeating them, but evidently there is some suggestion in the atmosphere that makes it seem relevant. Twenty years ago it would have seemed preposterous to advance such an argument as in any way affecting a man's fitness for office.

The indications are that we may soon find ourselves adopting a subtly feminized point of view as unsatisfactory to both men and women as the one now prevailing in the United States. The change, in spite of the stupid simplicity of our traditional *mores*, would seem to be for the worse. We were groping toward adjustment; now we are drifting toward equality.

There are two kinds of Americanized Porto Ricans: the young men freely and spontaneously shaped into the image of whatever happens to be the Young Generation up here, just as Young Generation up here, just as young Germans, Italians, and Swedes are shaped in New York or Pittsburgh; and the older fellows who Americanize themselves out of a sense of their inadequacy as Porto Ricans. The former may be as charming and as innocuous as the youths who play tennis in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The latter are a sight for the gods. Their manner is as unctuous as that of Y.M.C.A. secretaries and quite as unreal. They approve and disapprove of many things. They have Ethics and go in for Service. They emphasize the importance of their smallest actions to the working of the sacred social machinery. They need the crutch of a principle to support their conduct as it hobbles along the straight and narrow path where the primroses grow—and, of course, they always find one.

Whether as a result of American tailoring or of psycho-biological imitation, their paunches no longer grow in the reticent Spanish fashion, but rather in the aggressive, imperialistic, genial American fashion. They are gregarious and dull and oversimian, and try pathetically to find innocent amusement. They immolate the paramount heritage of Spain—individuality—in the altar of

regular-fellowship. The girls don't like them, and I maliciously suggest this fact as an issue to the Porto Rican nationalists.

The zone of life in the cities has been speeded up. A certain efficiency is observable. Clerks take shorter siestas after lunch. Telephone connections are quickly achieved, although private messages may still be conveyed through the operators if they like your voice. Transportation is rapid and cheap. Good liquor is delivered within a few minutes—Scotch, \$5 a quart; champagne, \$7; Holland gin, \$8. Soda fountains suffuse the narrow streets with their sweet odor. Cafés are arranged to look more and more like glittering American beaneries, but conversation and not food is still the major inducement for tarrying in them.

The population is about as susceptible to nationalist emotions as to American manners. While the latter grow like a monstrous parasite on the island's Latinity, it remains a fact that whenever a politician of intelligence and prestige has taken up the issue of national independence, he has swayed the island. It is the students at the university, however, who give expression to the most conscious and complex form of nationalism, not only as a sovereign control of the jobs, but as a cultural continuity.

They don't want the local temperament violated by the bayonets of education or by the contagion imminent in close commercial relationships. They want Porto Rico to be Porto Rico, not a lame replica of Ohio or Arizona. They want its spirit to be part of the great Spanish spirit, now in process of saving itself from its political and economic ruin.

IV

The university authorities, under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Benner, who is far from sharing the political viewpoint of the students, follow a policy that is friendly to this end. The university can boast of the most brilliant Spanish department on American territory. It is in fact among the soundest of any to be found in Spanish-speaking countries, having enjoyed at one time or another

the services of such men as Vasconcelos, ex-Minister of Education of Mexico; De Onis, head of the Spanish department at Columbia; Amado Alonso, of the Centro de Estudios Historicos of Madrid; Americo Castro of Oxford, and many other first-rate men.

What effect this may have on the destiny of the island is of course doubtful. However, saving a culture, even an inferior one, from becoming the monkey of another, even a superior one, is a good in itself. And in the present case it is by no means certain that the heritage shared by Porto Rico is to be unfavourably compared with the heritage to which the blind forces of production and exchange now seek to hook it up.

The haphazard manner in which the character of the island spars for survival may influence is to be semi-independent, like Cuba, or autonomous under some special dispensation of Congress, is a question to be determined by the interplay of politic and economic interest. But it is certain that it will never be incorporated into the Union as a State save through the operation of cultural forces: that is, not unless, and until, our manner of life and thought has been respectably Americanized.

Will this ever come about? Will the island retain its historical personality? An unqualified answer to either of these questions would necessarily fall short of the possibilities. Perhaps a more absurd fate is in store for us. Perhaps a more absurd fate is in store for us. Perhaps we are destined to be neither Porto Ricans nor Americans, but merely puppets of a mongrel state of mind, susceptible to American thinking and proud of Latin thought, subservient to American living and worshipful of the ancestral way of life. Perhaps we are to discuss Cervantes and eat pork and beans in the Child's restaurant that must be opened sooner or later. Perhaps we will try not to let mother catch us reading the picaresque verses of Quevedo. Perhaps we are going to a singularly fantastic and painless hell in our own sweet way. Perhaps all this is nothing but a foretaste of Pan-Americanism.